

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 560

CS 002 875

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TITLE Phonics and Spelling.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (21st, Anaheim, California, May 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; Early Childhood Education; Instructional Programs; Intermediate Grades; *Language Skills; *Phonics; *Prereading Experience; *Reading Instruction; *Spelling Instruction; Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

This paper details the development of two commercial programs for the instruction of language skills. The first, a reading program for the first two months of first grade, is designed to move children from speaking to reading without experiencing failure. In teaching prereading phonics skills (letter recognition, letter writing, awareness of letter-name sounds, and syntax matching), emphasis is placed on the child's active response to speech rather than on decoding. The second program, intended for use by poor spellers in the middle grades, subordinates correct spelling to vocabulary growth. Attention to word or sentence structure is perceived to be counterproductive to idea transfer; language experience and knowledge of word meaning are assumed to be more effective facilitators of higher spelling accuracy than is the teaching of spelling mechanics. Word recognition techniques stressing meaning, as well as team and game approaches and choral or dramatic reading, are suggested to improve spelling ability. (KS)

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International Reading Association
Anaheim May 11, 1976

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PHONICS AND SPELLING

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Each of us on this panel has conducted research in phonics and spelling over a long period of years. In educational research, for every answer found, a dozen more questions arise. This results in the refinement of one's ignorance. This panel represents a tremendous amount of highly refined ignorance in phonics and spelling. We propose to share it with you.

In talking about educational problems it is pleasant to resort to the evasive generalities about learning that pass for psychology. When one builds materials for classroom use, however, generalizations must be changed into specifics, and that is when real thinking begins. The building of package mixes in reading and phonics is my major retirement activity. Dr. Helen Murphy and I have entered phonics programs into commercial competition, so our decisions on phonics practices are on record. Instead of describing those products, I propose to talk about ingredients of phonics in progress.

Our current venture on which we have been working several years, is a reading program for the first two months of first grade, designed to move every child from speaking into reading so smoothly that even the very bottom children never experience failure. We expect to eliminate reading disabilities among children who speak English. It is a program that teaches phonics and word recognition through the active languages of speaking and writing; every child is busy; every second either talking or writing. At this level, a non-busy child moves to hyper-active inattention or to lethargic inattention; he has no other choices. So we keep him busy.

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This program is based on the premise that progress in reading depends upon the phonics background the child brings to first grade. We were led to this position through many attempts to discover the nature of reading readiness. We found that the child who learned to read easily, or who had learned to read before coming to school, had a rich supply of prereading abilities related to phonics; non-readers and "bottom tenth" readers had a very meager supply. To illustrate what I mean by prereading phonics, I have written an article for mothers, titled: "Will Your Child Learn to Read." Here it is.

(article on next page)

WILL YOUR CHILD LEARN TO READ?

These simple tests will usually give the answer:

1. How many of these letters can he name?

o s t a r e n i l u c p d
m b h f y g v w x k z j q

2. Writing letters. How many of these letters can he write? (From dictation, not from copy.) Dictate the letters listed above; score leniently, either a capital or a small letter will do; count reversed letters as correct.
3. Awareness of letter-name sounds in words. How many letters can he name at the beginning of these spoken words? Do not show the words. Say, "Say, open; say it again, open. What letter do you hear at the beginning of open?" Do the same for this list of words:

open, even, iron, apron, useful, beaver, ceiling, deep, effort, genius, jail, Kate, elevator, emerald, enter, peach, army, Esther, teacher, veal, extra, zebra.
4. Syntax matching: Awareness of separate words in spoken sentences and the ability to match them with words in print. How many of these words can he identify in sentences? Put a marker under each sentence; do not point to the separate words. Say, "This says, Come here; say it again. Now draw a circle around here,"

Come here.

You have two thumbs.

Don't fall.

These kittens are hungry.

Clap your hands.

This girl has black hair.

Catch the ball.

Can you climb a tree?

Ride my new bike.

You can ride this horse.

Words to circle: (Do not show these words to the child.)

1 - here; 2 - fall; 3 - clap; 4 - ball; 5 - new;
6 - two; 7 - hungry; 8 - girl; 9 - you; 10 - ride.

	Reading Success Indicated			
	Fail	Low	Average	High
1. Letter names	0 - 4	5 - 12	13 - 20	21 - 26
2. Writing letters	0 - 3	4 - 8	9 - 17	18 - 26
3. Letter name sound	0 - 3	4 - 11	12 - 18	19 - 22
4. Syntax matching	0 - 1	2 - 3	4 - 6	7 - 10

Murphy-Durrell Prereading Abilities Tests © 1976
From: Sound Start Borg-Warner Educational Systems;

All of these skills -- and some others -- are properly classified as prereading phonics. They determine success in beginning reading. They are the essential skills to move the child from spoken language to printed language. The forms of letters and the names of letters are both useful in learning to read; awareness of separate sounds in spoken words is essential to phonics progress; awareness of separate words in spoken sentences is obviously a part of spoken word, printed word relationship. Our discovery that the perception of letter name sounds in words was much easier than the perception of phonemes led us to use letter-name sound phonics as an initial teaching medium. The average September first-grader will identify 17 letter name sounds in spoken words; he will identify only five phonemes. The typical "bottom third" first grader will identify ten letter names sounds, but will have a zero score in phonemes. To teach phonics the easiest way, one uses letter-name-sound phonics as an initial teaching medium. There are rather restricted limits for various letters, and by the second month even the bottom third children have moved from letter-name-sound phonics to phonemic phonics. They are ready for success in reading by standard approaches.

In teaching prereading phonics we follow the same patterns seen in our other phonics packages. We cluster suitable words to emphasize the particular letters and sounds being taught; meanings are maintained through picture and oral context clues. Vowels are stabilized through phonograms, emphasizing letter-cluster phonics. No rules are taught; there is no "sounding out" -- no "decoding" -- and no detached presentation of sounds. We avoid failure by taking advantage of the fact that every child can name pictures, repeat sentences, and respond to speech. We call this part of the program "talking into reading." We also provide many practices in "writing into reading" using the long-established information that "the desire to write comes earlier than the desire to read."

The next package mix on our list is a spelling program for poor spellers in middle grades. This is only in the planning stage; it may have to await my next incarnation. In the interval, however, I would be glad to have any of you follow these leads, and if they work, I will turn to other unsolved world problems.

The major purpose of a spelling program should be to increase the power, precision, and color of written expression; correct spelling is subordinate to vocabulary growth. A synonym-context test is the best basis we have found for measuring vocabulary growth in writing. Such a test contains a reading selection in which words and phrases are underlined; the student is expected to write synonyms for these words and phrases. The test is constructed so that it elicits words recently taught in spelling. We find that spelling programs that emphasize phonics, word structures, and rules are low in transfer to writing; when the same words are taught by enrichment techniques they appear from four to six times as often in the writing vocabulary; their spelling is improved about twenty-five per cent over structural approaches. (Spencer, 1958; Catterson, 1959; McSweeney, 1969; Cehen, 1969).

At this point I find it necessary to speak about the nature of language. Language is a method of transferring images and ideas from one mind to another. Listening and speaking do this by oral symbols; reading and writing do it by printed symbols. It is the imagery-idea transfer that is language. Phonemics, phonetics, and phonics have little to do with idea transfer; in fact they are usually antagonistic to it. The more attention paid to these fragments of symbols, the less the imagery transfer of the word. The vocal gymnastics required to produce speech are, and should be, below the conscious level. There is no language in ch/ai/r or c/a/t; no advancement

of language fluency through attention to short and long vowels, voiced and nonvoiced consonants, digraphs, diphthongs, or attention to variant spellings. Attention to word or sentence structure is often counter-productive to language; if you want to destroy an idea, call attention to errors in pronunciation, spelling, or grammar. Attention to ideas seldom survives attention to structure.

Perhaps a little phonics goes a long way, and after we establish the fact that words contain sounds and that these sounds are attached to these letters, we should leave it at that and go in for vocabulary enrichment. Perhaps the best way to make progress in spelling is to avoid all the phonics one possibly can, letting advanced phonics skills grow inductively. When Comerford's study found a correlation of .80 between spelling and the ability to recognize homophones, Dr. Ernest Horn reflected that if we taught homophones directly we might only increase the variety of misspellings. Of course, there are possibilities in teaching spellings by using structures which reinforce meanings, especially certain affixes and roots. We have tried our hands at some of these, with varying success; it seems that morphemic approaches ought to work better than ours do.

It would be possible to ^{design} spelling approaches with very high imagery loadings, presenting the words visually while performing all sorts of intellectual gymnastics with them and their derived forms. Keyser (1954) found a high degree of transfer to spelling by word recognition techniques which stressed meaning; even the appearance of a word in a glossary improved its spelling. One might present words in several forms of choral reading or dramatic reading, where the possibility of imagery is enhanced through variations in pitch, stress, juncture and paralinguistic. Various team and game approaches might help; the \$25,000 Pyramid on television, for example. Team dramatization of words in lists is fun, and may improve spelling.

We have tried team approaches to using spelling lists in stories, with pupils choosing from derived forms of the words. These are language-experience approaches which ^{permit} control and concentration in specific vocabulary areas; such control seems desirable for reasonable mastery.

Since spelling is useful only in writing, a plan for spelling improvement must concern itself with the content and motivation of written composition. And this is not easy. Pupil subject preferences studies find that language arts is the least liked school subject, and that writing of themes is the most disliked element in language arts. How does one improve the significance, palatability, and frequency of the writing tasks in the classroom? Until we do, we will not have the desired impetus to spelling improvement. This an area of unfinished business that will be occupying our successors for many years. Meanwhile, we must continue to encourage free competition in the building of instructional materials; it is much too early to standardize our current ignorance.

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